

Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History

Volume 8 | Issue 2

Article 1

11-2018

Why Hannibal Lost the Second Punic War

Ho Yee Lam

University of California, Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lam, Ho Yee (2018) "Why Hannibal Lost the Second Punic War," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2018.080201
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol8/iss2/1>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Why Hannibal Lost the Second Punic War?

Ho Yee Lam

University of California at Berkeley

(Berkeley, California)

After the First Punic War (264-241 BCE), Carthage tried to regain an empire in the Mediterranean by conquering Spain. When Hannibal seized Saguntum, an ally of Rome, he ignored an ultimatum from Rome, triggering the Second Punic War. Although Livy (59 BCE-17 CE) and Plutarch (45-127) presented Roman victory as the will of the gods (a common convention in Roman literature), they both support the reasoning of the far more critical Greek historian Polybius, who examined how Rome took over the Mediterranean.¹ Rome won this long seesaw war because of three advantages. Firstly, the geography helped Rome. Secondly, Rome had a much larger population. Thirdly and finally, Rome had three excellent commanders: Fabius Maximus, Claudius Marcellus, and Scipio Africanus. Carthage, on the other hand, had only one: Hannibal.

In the Second Punic War, Rome had an upper hand over Carthage geographically, even though the war was fought in the Roman homeland, and they had control of the sea around Italy, preventing Carthaginian supplies from arriving. Carthage had lost dominance in the Mediterranean after the First Punic War, as Polybius said, quoting the Treaty of Aegates Islands: “At the close

¹ Livy, Plutarch, Polybius were the mainstream historians who recorded the detail of the Second Punic War, and they were supported by Dio, Florus, and Appian (the later Roman Historians). Although the Roman sources overly glorify Rome in this war, we have no other primary sources to tell the story from other points of view.

of the war for Sicily ... The Carthaginians are to evacuate the whole of Sicily and all the Islands lying between Italy and Sicily ... to evacuate Sardinia and pay a further sum of 1,200 talents.”³ Although the Carthaginians’ Navy was limited due to the treaty of 241 BCE, Hannibal built a fleet of 52 ships in (218 BCE).⁴ But even this fleet was never sufficient enough to challenge the Roman navy of 220 ships, with which they controlled the seas around Italy, converting the Mediterranean into a friendly lake.⁵ This advantage allowed them to prevent Carthage from supplying Hannibal by sea.⁶ Although Hannibal cleverly created a disadvantage for Rome by using Italy to feed his army, hoping the Carthaginians would eat up some of the Roman grain supply,⁷ control over land was contested, and neither Rome nor Carthage dominated it totally. But Rome controlled the sea, and Rome’s navy saved them from the new Punic invasions.

The Carthaginian army, under the command of Hannibal, faced a great geographical challenge since they had to march from Spain through the harsh mountain terrain of the Pyrenees and the Alps into Italy. Without a large fleet, Hannibal could not take any risks by sea, so he chose to march his army over land. Polyb said Hannibal’s army originally had 50,000 infantry, 9,000

³ Polyb. *The Histories* 3.27.1-8; Liv. *The History of Rome* 21.19-20 has very similar terms as Polyb. 3.27 and Appian *Roman History* 5.2.2

⁴ Polyb. 3.33.14

⁵ Polyb. 3.41.2; Liv. 21.17.3; App. 6.3.14

⁶ In 1890s, Captain Alfred Mahan, the lecturer and president of the United States Naval War College, argued that America could not sustain its oversea market and territories without the protection of its strong naval in his book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*. He explained Britain could maintain her empire, because her navy protected her trade routes and were able to eliminate the other European rival’s naval power. He pointed out the importance of naval supplies between the mainland U.S. and her oversea territories militarily and economically, and his idea eventually encouraged the U.S. to expand her navy to protect its oversea interests and military sea supplies. Moreover, Chester G. Starr also had a similar opinion. Through his book, *The Influence of Sea Power in the Ancient History*, he said the the sea transportations were the main elements to achieve victory in the Peloponnesian War and the Second Punic War. The ships were mainly used to transport large amounts of troops in a fast manner effectively and secure supply routes. It also prevented enemies to supply their own troops and maneuver their troops without inflicting heavy casualties under natural causes. Starr said sea power was the main element to win wars in the Ancient Warfares.

⁷ The Romans needed to plants the field to support their large populations, but the Carthaginians harvested the Roman crops during the war. Carthage intended to use Roman resources to feed his army, because there were only few supplies reaching to Hannibal.

calvary, and 21 elephants.⁹ The land route from Spain to Italy was too long and rough for Hannibal's army and took many lives. "The whole march from New Carthage had taken [Hannibal] five months, and he spent fifteen days in crossing the Alps, and ... the army that was left to him had ..." 20,000 infantry, 6,000 calvary, and 12 elephants, and the Romans had "250,000 foot and about 23,000 horses ... the total number of Roman and allies able to bear arms was more than 700,000 foot and 70,000 horse."¹⁰ Moreover, Polyb also said "[Hannibal] had lost many men by hand of the enemy in crossing of rivers and on the march in general, and the precipices and difficulties of the Alps had cost him not only many men, but a far greater number of horse and pack animals."¹¹ The land ineffective land route took a long time and cost Hannibal more than 50 percent of his men by way of death and desertion. Although Hannibal possessed a fine army initially, his numbers shrank before he reached Italy. Before the first battle, Rome had no casualty, but Hannibal had lost 25,000 men to the nature. Eventually, Hannibal recruited Gallic mercenaries in Cisalpine Gaul who were angry over recent Roman expansion near Cremona.¹² Despite heavy losses accrued during the journey, Hannibal defeated the Romans at Trebia and Ticinus in 218 BCE. Although Hannibal achieved many victories during his Italian campaign, only once did he receive reinforcements from home.¹³ The rough and dangerous land route made it impossible for Hannibal to replenish his army effectively. In fact, when his brother brought an army across the Alps to help Hannibal, he was intercepted and destroyed by the Romans at the battle of Metaurus

⁹ Polyb. 3.38; Liv. 21.22 provided the number of elephants, but Ployb. did not.

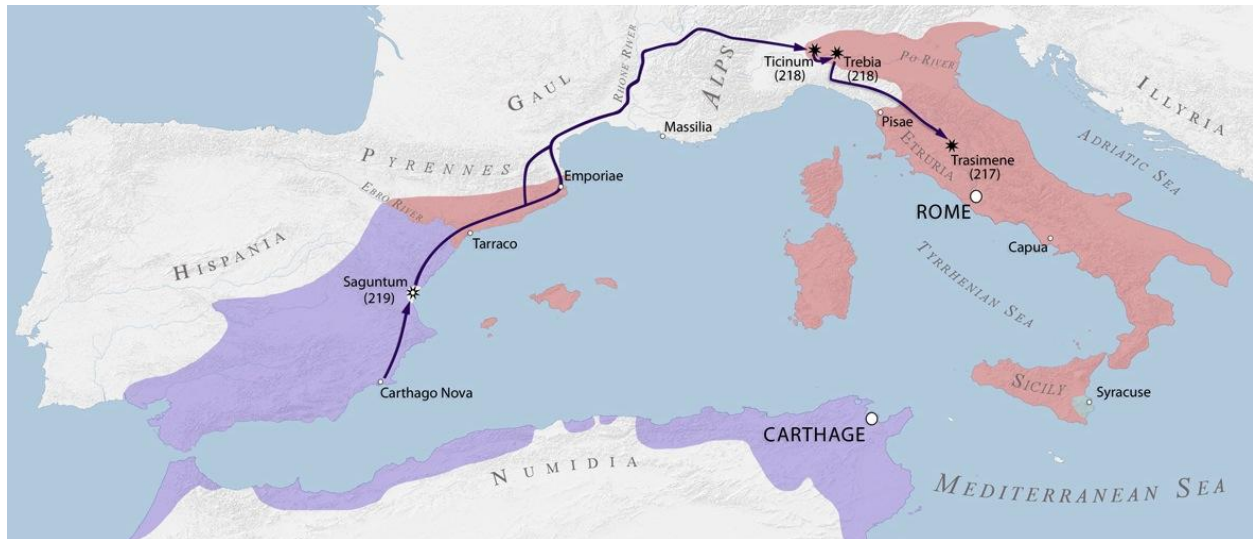
¹⁰ Polyb. 3.56.3-4

¹¹ Polyb. 3.56.1

¹² Liv. 21.25.2

¹³ Liv. 23.42: Only once were the Carthaginian able to evade the Roman fleet and bring supplies and reinforcements to support Hannibal in Italy in 215 BCE. Bomilcar arrived in South Italy with an army from Carthage by sea. Hannibal met up with him and combined the two armies together (Liv. 23.41-43). However, it was not enough to support a long term war over a decade.

River in 207 BCE without Hannibal's knowledge. Hannibal learned of Hasdrubal's march only when he received the decapitated head of his brother via catapult mail.¹⁴



Map. The Second Punic War (218-201 BCE). Source: Bret Mulligan, *Cornelius Nepos/Life of Hannibal*

The Roman Republic had the ability to suffer heavy casualties in a long war because of their large draftable population. They also received support from the soldiers of the *socii* (allies) in most of the war. Although Polyb might exaggerate the total number of Roman troops and allies, his data suggests that the Roman Republic had a herculean ability to draft hundreds of Roman citizens to serve in her cyclopean army. After Hannibal defeated the Romans at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, some of the Southern Italian allies, including Capua (the second largest city in Italy), deserted Rome and joined Hannibal. Despite multiple defeats, Rome still had enough men to establish enormous legions in a short period of time.

¹⁴ Liv. 27.51.11; Florus *Epitome of Roman History* 1.22.49-53; Dio *Roman History* 15.9.1; Polyb. 11.2-3: he said only Hasdrubal was killed in battle.

On the other hand, Carthage did not have a huge draftable population to support the war, so they were not able to suffer heavy casualties. This weakness allowed the wiser Roman commanders (Fabius' plan) sap Hannibal's manpower, which was mixed between Carthaginians and mercenaries. Although Hannibal kept winning battles and inflicting heavy casualties, he could not win the war because he did not have enough men. The mercenaries would desert from Hannibal's ranks if their lives were always in danger.¹⁵ Hannibal invaded Italy with too small an army to fight a long war. Hannibal had a fixed number of soldiers which he could not replace easily (although he had false hope he could recruit Italians).¹⁶ While the Romans were able to take risky military maneuvers and trade casualties man for man, Hannibal could not. Although Hannibal was able to capture a few Southern Italian cities, he was never able to capture Rome.¹⁷ According to Polyb "Hannibal at the same time quitted New Carthage with his army and advanced towards Saguntum ... At length after eight months of hardship and anxiety he took the city by storm."¹⁸ He pointed out that the Carthaginians were weak in siege warfare because they spent eight months to capture Saguntum with difficulties. Saguntum was a city significantly smaller than Rome. If Hannibal had difficulty in taking a small city near his home base, he would never be able to capture the city of Rome with insufficient forces.

Whenever an Italian city defected from Rome to Carthage, he had to give them a garrison of his men to protect them. Later after he had left, the Romans would attack and destroy the

¹⁵ Liv. 22.43.1-6: In 216 BCE some of Hannibal's mercenaries threatened to desert because of serious starvation and arrears of pay. Some rumors even said that the Hannibal's Spanish mercenaries intended to join the Roman army to save themselves from starvation, so Hannibal would need to abandon his infantry in order to save himself; Dio 15.3: later in 216 BCE some Spanish and African mercenaries deserted Hannibal for Rome. Hannibal had no choice but to return to Capua. Absent in Liv. 23.1 and 23.18.

¹⁶ Polyb. 3.56.4

¹⁷ Saguntum was smaller than Rome, but Hannibal took 8 months to capture it. See also Hannibal's failure to capture Casilinum in 216 (Liv. 23.18). Moreover, some Italian cities fought Carthage to death before Hannibal captured them. Some cities surrendered to him. Hannibal sometimes received assistance from spies to capture some cities. Some cities were not attacked by Hannibal due to geographic difficulties.

¹⁸ Polyb. 3.17.1-17.9

garrisons, ultimately reducing the Carthaginian manpower. Every garrison which Hannibal deployed was destroyed. As a result, the distance between his army and the garrison became his enemy. Fabius Maximus broke the Carthaginian army with each demolished garrison. The longer the war, the smaller Hannibal's army became. With a reduced ability of mustering soldiers, Hannibal had little chance of forcing Rome to surrender, allowing the Romans to win the Second Punic War in the end.

Polyb believes that the Romans had a higher quality of soldiers than the Carthaginians because Roman soldiers served the legions as free citizens, were a free people fighting for their freedom, children, and homeland, and were willing to sacrifice their lives for honor and nation.¹⁹ Although the Roman soldiers were seasonal citizen soldiers, they had determined hearts and the strong will to fight at all costs against the Carthaginian invasion. In their darkest moment right after Cannae, they were willing to suffer any extreme to defeat the invaders. This comes partly from the false memories of the tyranny of the Roman kings.²⁰

Compared to the Romans, the Carthaginians had soldiers of a lower quality. This assumption was based on the fact that the Carthaginians partly relied on mercenaries. Polyb also claims Italians are stronger and more courageous than Africans, and it was unwise for the government of Carthage "to depend for maintenance of freedom on the courage of the mercenaries."²¹ Mercenaries did not have valor and loyalty and fought only for money. They were not reliable in the battlefield. Having no loyalty toward Carthage, the mercenaries were unwilling to sacrifice themselves totally for the Carthaginian Republic. After Rome defeated Carthage in the

¹⁹ Polyb. 6.52.2-8.

²⁰ Plutarch *The Parallel Lives Cato the Younger*: Cato the Younger committed suicide for this reason 150 years later (70-71). He did not want to live under tyranny of the sole dictator of Julius Caesar. The senatorial power, under the leadership of Cato and Metellus Scipio, engaged Caesar in the Battle of Thapsus 46 BCE. The senatorial power lost. Cato wanted to defend his dignity as a free Roman, so he committed suicide rather suffered as a unfree prisoner of tyranny.

²¹ Polyb. 6.52.

First Punic War, the mercenaries demanded their wages from Carthage. Carthage refused and engaged her former mercenaries in the grueling Mercenaries' War (*Bellum Inexpiabile*), 241-39 BCE, in which she suffered many losses.²² Nonetheless, after Carthage finally defeated the mercenaries, she failed to learn from this mistake, and she had no choice but to continue to hire dangerous, disloyal mercenaries.

Rome possessed three excellent commanders: Fabius Maximus, Claudius Marcellus, and Scipio Africanus. Carthage's three best generals were Hannibal, his brother Hasdrubal, and Hasdrubal Gisco, but both Hasdrubals suffered defeats in Spain, and Hasdrubal Barca was killed at Metaurus River in 207 BCE. Although Hannibal defeated four Roman generals, generals who were not good military leaders, at Trebbia (218 BCE), Ticinus (218 BCE), Lake Trasimene (217 BCE), and Cannae (216 BCE), he could not repeatedly defeat the three Roman military experts.²⁴ Fabius rarely engaged Hannibal when Hannibal's army was large enough to fight. Later, when Hannibal's army had shrunk, he had too few men to risk a battle against Fabius. Fabius Maximus was a very careful general who did not take any risks.

The Dictator [Fabius Maximus] took over the army ... proceeded towards the enemy, showing the utmost care in reconnoitring all the various routes, and determined not to take any risks anywhere ... The Carthaginian [sic.] lost no time in marching out his men in battle order to give him the chance of fighting. But when he saw that the enemy kept perfectly quiet and that there were no signs of excitement in their camp ... he [Hannibal] was really in a very anxious state of mind ... he would have to do with a very different type of commander from Flaminius or Sempronius ... Fabius kept on high ground, at a moderate distance from the enemy, so that he never lost sight of him and never closed with him.²⁵

²² Polyb. 1.68-88 is major source for this war

²⁴ Liv. 13.17 and 46: both texts mentioned Hannibal withdrew from the battlefield, and Marcellus broke Hannibal's army in the Battle of Nola at 216 BCE; Liv. 25.21: Hannibal defeated Fulvius (another victory after Cannae); Liv. 25.23: Marcellus took Syracuse from Hannibal's procession at 212 BCE; Liv. 25.40: Marcellus victorious at Agrigentum at 212 BCE; Liv. 25.5-10: at 211 BCE, Fulvius and Hannibal fight at Battle of Anio.

²⁵ Liv. 22.12

Plut. also said “Fabius Maximus, who was held in the greatest esteem for his sagacity and trustworthiness, his excessive care in planning to avoid losses.”²⁶ Fabius did not engage Hannibal in open ground because he understood that Hannibal was a great general. Although Hannibal tried to lure Fabius into an ambush, Fabius cleverly realized Hannibal’s trap and confronted him indirectly.²⁷ He employed attrition against Hannibal, forcing his army to starve to death. Therefore, Fabius’ calculated strategies successfully shrunk down Hannibal’s army by guerrilla technique.²⁸

At the same time, Hannibal faced repeated attacks from Claudius Marcellus whose goal was to eliminate Hannibal’s ability to roam around Italy freely and fight battles. Marcellus was an aggressive general who was willing to trade man for man with Hannibal.²⁹ Marcellus was willing to fight Hannibal directly too since he knew Hannibal’s forces were limited. According to App, when Marcellus was recruiting auxiliaries from the land of Nerbovriges in Spain, one of Nerbovriges chiefs, without knowing the Romano-Nerbovriges peace agreement, attacked the rear of the Roman army.³⁰ Marcellus determinately laid siege on the Nerbovriges’ city and ordered his army to launch a bloodbath there. Marcellus confronted any enemies head to head aggressively without hesitation under any situation. Moreover, after the battle of Cannae, Plut. said

The people thought they had in him (Fabius Maximus) a general who sufficed for the defensive, but was inadequate for the offensive, and therefore turned their eyes upon Marcellus; and mingling and uniting his boldness and activity with the caution and forethought of Fabius, they sometimes elected both to be consuls together, and some made them, by turns, consul and proconsul, and sent them into the field.³¹

²⁶ Plut. *Marc.* 9.2

²⁷ Plut. *Fab.* 19.5-6

²⁸ Polyb. 89.8-9; Plut. *Fab.* 22-24; App. 7.3.13-16

²⁹ Marcellus was a good precedent for General Ulysses Grant. Grant knew that Robert E. Lee did not have enough manpower, so Grant was willing to trade casualties man for man, but not prisoners. Although the Confederates offered to exchange prisoners with the Union, the Union refused. Grant realized that Lee would run out of men, so Grant aggressively confronted Lee in many bloody battles, as if Marcellus did in the Second Punic War against Hannibal.

³⁰ App. 6.48-50

³¹ Plut. *Marc.* 9.2-3

Marcellus was a determined general who never gave up without a fight, although Rome had suffered serious losses in previous battles. By marching out of Canusium to challenge Hannibal, Marcellus showed Rome had not lost the will to fight. Marcellus confronted Hannibal rather than retreating. At the Battle of Nola (214 BCE), both armies suffered heavy casualties in a draw. For Roman morale, it was an achievement not to lose another battle to Hannibal, and it also broke Hannibal's string of victories. Plut. commented that "Hannibal himself used to say that he feared Fabius...and... Marcellus as an adversary; for by the one [Fabius] he [Hannibal] was prevented from doing any harm, while by the other [Marcellus] he [Hannibal] was actually harmed."³² This is why the Romans called Fabius "the shield of Rome" and Marcellus "the sword of Rome."³³ Hannibal had great respect and fear of Marcellus. Hannibal eventually killed Marcellus in 208 BCE, but only after suffering many losses.³⁴

P. Cornelius Scipio, later known as Africanus, used Rome's strength and Carthage's geographic weakness to bring down Carthage completely. In doing this, he restored the natural order of Rome's geographic strengths and Carthage's weaknesses, undoing all of Hannibal's efforts by copying Hannibal's battle tactics and his strategy to fight on enemy soil. Scipio understood that Spain was the main Carthaginian base to support Carthage in Africa, but Spain was hardly supporting Hannibal's army due to the distance. Most of the Spanish silver paid mercenaries to guard Carthage in Africa, and almost none went to Italy. While Fabius Maximus and Claudius Marcellus were holding Hannibal's army up, Scipio used Roman control of the seas to ship his legions to conquer Spain and eventually North Africa. Hannibal was not able to do anything about it. Scipio simultaneously defeated both Hasdrubals in Spain. Hannibal finally

³² Plut. *Marc.* 9.4,

³³ Poseidonius *apud* Plut. *Marc.* 9.4: The Romans used to call Fabius the "Shield of Rome" and Marcellus "the Sword of Rome."

³⁴ Polyb. 10.32; Liv. 25.26-27; Plut. *Marc.* 30.1-4; App. 7.8.50

returned to Carthage to fight against Scipio in 202 BCE, but Scipio defeated Hannibal in the Battle of Zama. Although Hannibal was a great general, Scipio was better.³⁵ Therefore, Carthage only possessed one good general fighting against three excellent Roman commanders. Not surprisingly, this deficit of command expertise eventually led to the doom of Carthage. Furthermore, it was beyond Hannibal's or anyone's ability to fight multiple Roman armies led by capable commanders in a long war in which one army contained him while the other armies reversed his gains. Hannibal desperately needed a second army in Italy led by a second capable general to guard his conquest. As mentioned above, the only time when a second Carthaginian army invaded, it was destroyed by Claudius Nero and Livius Salinator, men not even among the top three Roman generals.

In conclusion, after many Carthaginian victories over Rome in many battles, Rome won the war at Zama. The geography, the huge Roman population, and the high quality of Roman soldiers and commanders were the main factors which let Rome best Carthage. After the Second Punic War, Rome became the sole dominant power in the Western Mediterranean.

About the author

Ho Yee Lam (Sam) is a history major at UC Berkeley. His research interests include classics and Roman military history.

³⁵ Claud. Quad. and Acil. *apud* Liv. 35.14.5-12; Plut. *Flam.* 21.3-4; App. *Syr.* 2.10: 15 years later, Scipio and Hannibal discussed the three greatest generals of history. Hannibal argued Alexander the Great, Pyrrhus, and himself (*Pyr.* 8.2, *Mor. Frag., Scip.* 2.). Some people believe that Hannibal's opinion honors Scipio above Alexander.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Appian of Alexandria. *Appian's Roman History*. vol. 1. Translated by Horace White.

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1912.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106005384521;view=1up;seq=8>.

Cary, Earnest, eds. "Cassius Dio: Roman History." The University of Chicago.

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/home.html (accessed September 27, 2018).

E. S. Forster, eds. "Florus: Florus: Epitome of Roman History." The University of Chicago.

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Florus/Epitome/home.html>
(accessed September 27, 2018).

Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. vol. 36. The Collier Press. 1910,

books.google.com/books/about/The_Prince.html?id=GC0LAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false.

H.J. Edwards, eds. "Polybius: The Histories." The University of Chicago.

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/> (accessed September 27, 2018)

Perrin, Bernadotte, eds. "Plutarch, the Parallel Lives." The University of Chicago.

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/home.html> (accessed September 27, 2018).

Robert, Canon, eds. "Titus Livius (Livy), The History of Rome." Perseus Digital Library.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0026> (accessed September 27, 2018).

Secondary Sources:

Mulligan, Bret. “Cornelius Nepos/Life of Hannibal - The Second Punic War (218-201 BC).”

Dickinson College Commentaries. <http://dcc.dickinson.edu/nepos-hannibal/second-punic-war> (accessed September 27, 2018).

Mahan, Alfred. *Influence of Seapower upon History, 1660 - 1783*. Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company Inc, 2003.

Starr, Chester G. *The Influence of Sea Power on Ancient History*. New-York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1989.